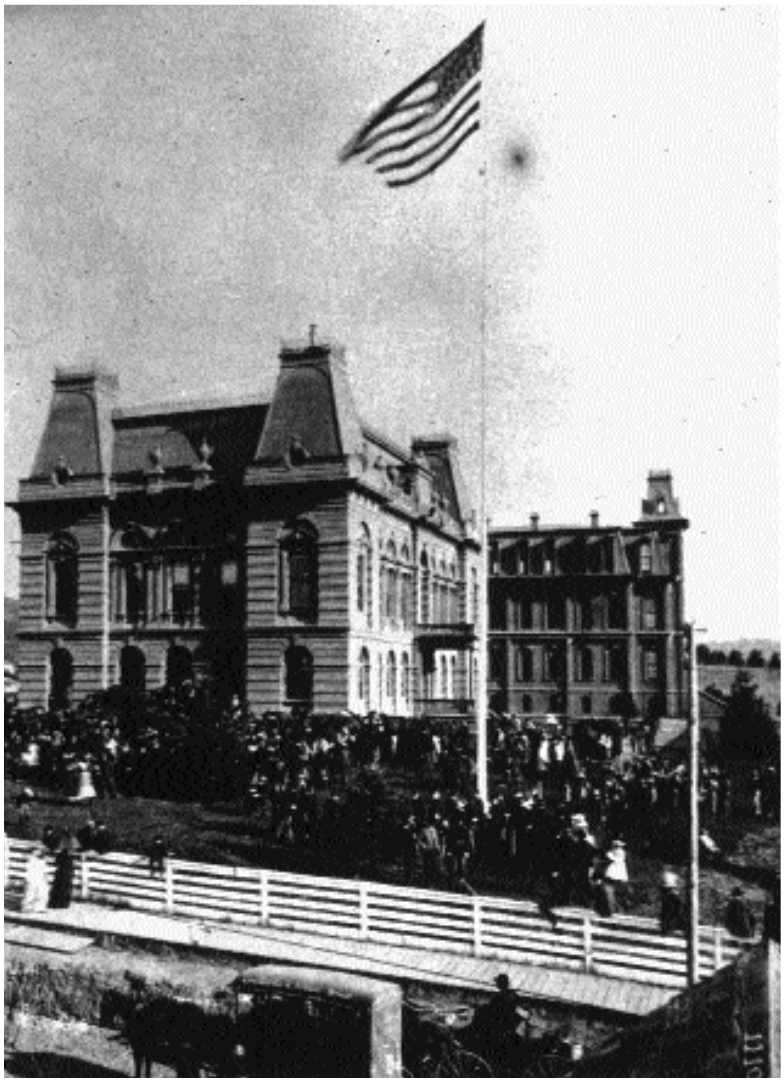
James Wentworth

Hands on the Landmarks, Part I

Detail of restored balustrade, north facade, Villard Hall. Photo by George Bleekman III.

The University of Oregon has a unique opportunity in the realm of historic preservation. The University is steward for several historic buildings, two of which are National Historic Landmarks (NHLs). It also has a comprehensive graduate program in historic preservation in the School of Architecture and Allied Arts. Over the years the Western Oregon climate has taken its toll on the elaborate wooden components on the exteriors of these buildings. Despite occasional good faith efforts to maintain them, they have gradually deteriorated to a critical point. During the 1950s and 1960s, much deteriorated material was simply removed as part of efforts to "neaten up" the buildings. Now as public and administrative sentiment has warmed toward historic structures, more thought and effort are being put into caring for the built cultural resources on the campus and unusual methods are being pursued.

Villard and Deady halls. Photo courtesy University of Oregon Archives.



Funding has always been frugal within Oregon's State System of Higher Education (OSSHE), and until quite recently many programs, such as maintenance, suffered in order to benefit the academic programs. Not an uncommon problem, deferred maintenance at the University has begun to take its toll. Many buildings, including some of the newer ones, were experiencing failures in exterior envelope and other critical building systems. OSSHE finally realized that it needed to care for its capital resources or risk a true crisis. Capital repair priorities were established and the most important needs addressed first. Deady and Villard halls, both NHLs, were high on the list. As much historic fabric was lost due to deterioration and some from intervention, complete restorations were agreed upon.

Long the advocates for attention on the these buildings, members of the faculty of the Historic Preservation Program were eager to see restoration efforts begin on Deady and Villard. A workshop was offered whereby students would work on the design and produce working drawings for the restoration of the east porch of Villard Hall. The class was offered in 1987 and was successful. Students produced a usable set of documents and benefited from working on an actual project.

Faculty then went one step further and planned to involve students in the actual work of the restoration. As the Physical Plant was now interested in having the work done and had the funding, it was agreed upon that a class would be offered, led by a professional preservation carpenter, Gregg Olson, under the direction

Southeast tower of Villard Hall before restoration. Photo by George Bleekman III.

of the HP faculty, with materials provided by the Plant. This unusual relationship proved successful as the students participated in the actual woodworking while assisting Olson. Two years later, in 1989, the collaborative approach was tried again on a much larger piece of the building, the northeast tower. This involved a lot more work of several types so the scope of involvement changed accordingly. Physical Plant craftsmen were added to the team, both to lead in executing the work and to learn from Olson. The intent was to expand their skills and knowledge relating to historic preservation and enable them eventually to carry on the work unassisted. Students and tradesmen worked and learned side by side. In 1991 the northwest tower and north facade were restored, again led by Olson and involving both students and Physical Plant craftsmen including Steve Parker, Tom Johnson, and Bill Mirabella.

In 1993, focus shifted from Villard over to Deady Hall, which was the first building of the University. Restoration efforts began on the building's east tower, and this time coordination and construction were executed entirely by the Physical Plant. In spring 1994 students again assisted in the construction as the west tower project was begun. The class was led by members of the Physical Plant under my direction. An architecture graduate of the University, I learned from Olson during work on Villard's northwest tower. Outside help was sought, and two preservation carpenters, Jonathan Smith and George Bleekman III, and a sheet metal worker with considerable restoration experience, Art Corliss, were hired. Smith and Bleekman were also finishing up graduate degrees in historic preservation from the University so their employment had the obvious advantage of further expanding ties to the Historic Preservation Program as well as together bringing about 25 years of experience with restoration to the team.

Once the Deady towers were finished in late 1994, work shifted back over to Villard. Another class during spring 1995 again involved several students in the work. This time the class was led by both Bleekman and me and included a model apprenticeship framework. Plans are underway for expanding the scope of future classes to include more study into and practice with historic woodworking and sheet metal techniques, taking advantage of a considerable collection of antique tools owned personally by members of the team. This is an exciting prospect that goes far beyond merely executing the work and maximizes the opportunities inherent in such a unique partnership between academia and facilities maintenance.

James Wentworth holds a Master's Degree in Architecture from the University of Oregon and currently serves as preservation project manager at the University of Oregon Physical Plant.

Another example of a partnership between the Historic Preservation Program and local organizations focused on historic paint analysis on the University of Oregon campus. In 1990 the University offered a class, led by historic preservationist Jill MacDonald, and the Physical Plant allowed them to use the Collier House, a former president's residence, as a study vehicle. The extensive restoration report produced by the class revealed a significant polychrome color scheme was originally used. When restoration work was later executed, the report was implemented and the building repainted according to the original scheme. The success of this project led the Plant to pursue further paint analyses in conjunction with the Historic Preservation Program. In 1994 another paint analysis class was offered, this time funded by the Physical Plant, and resulted in eleven buildings being studied. These historic paint reports will be used by the Plant in the future as these buildings are repainted according to their original or most significant paint schemes.